What Was Catharism? What Did Cathar Christians Believe?

Austin Cline

Cathars & Albigenses: What Was Catharism?

What did Cathars believe?

[SVG] The Château de Puilaurens. GUIZIOU Franck / hemis.fr / Getty Images

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Updated on June 25, 2019

The Cathars came from the region west-north-west of Marseilles on Golfe du Lion, the old province of Languedoc. They were a heretical sect of Christians who lived in Southern France during the 11th and 12th centuries. One branch of the Cathars became known as the Albigenses because they took their name from the local town Albi. Cathar beliefs probably developed as a consequence of traders coming from Eastern Europe, bringing teachings of the Bogomils.

Names

- Albigenses (from the town of Albi)
- Cathars (from the Greek *katharos*, which means "unpolluted" or "pure")

Cathar Theology

Cathar doctrines, regarded as heresies by other Christians, are generally known through attacks on them by their opponents. Cathar beliefs are thought to have included a fierce anti-clericalism and the Manichean dualism which divided the world into good and evil principles, with matter being intrinsically evil and mind or spirit being intrinsically good. As a result, the Cathars were an extreme ascetic group, cutting themselves off from others in order to retain as much purity as possible.

Gnosticism

Cathar theology was essentially Gnostic in nature. They believed that there were two "gods"—one malevolent and one good. The former was in charge of all visible and material things and was held responsible for all the atrocities in the Old Testament. The benevolent god, on the other hand, was the one the Cathars worshipped and was responsible for the message of Jesus. Accordingly, they made every effort to follow the teachings of Jesus as closely as possible.

Cathars vs. Catholicism

Cathar practices were often in direct contradiction to how the Catholic Church conducted business, especially with regards to the issues of poverty and the moral character of priests. The Cathars believed that everyone should be able to read the Bible, translating into the local language. Because of this, the Synod of Toulouse in 1229 expressly condemned such translations and even forbade lay people to own a Bible.

Treatment of the Cathars by the Catholics was atrocious. Secular rulers were used to torture and maim the heretics, and anyone who refused to do this was themselves punished. The Fourth Lateran Council, which authorized the state to punish religious dissenters, also authorized the state to confiscate all the land and property of the Cathars, resulting in a very nice incentive for state officials to do the church's bidding.

Crusade Against the Cathars

Innocent III launched a Crusade against the Cathar heretics, turning the suppression into a full military campaign. Innocent had appointed Peter of

Castelnau as the papal legate responsible for organizing the Catholic opposition to the Cathars, but he was murdered by someone thought to be employed by Raymond VI, the Count of Tolouse and leader of Cathar opposition. This caused the general religious movement against the Cathars to turn into a full-fledged crusade and military campaign.

Inquisition

An Inquisition against the Cathars was instituted in 1229. When the Dominicans took over the Inquisition of the Cathars, things only got worse for them. Anyone accused of heresy had no rights, and witnesses who said favorable things about the accused were themselves sometimes accused of heresy.

Understanding the Cathars

Bernard Gui gives a good summary of the Cathar position, of which this is a portion:

> *In the first place, they usually say of themselves that they are good Christians, who do not swear, or lie, or speak evil of others; that they do not kill any man or animal, nor anything having the breath of life, and that they hold the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel as the apostles taught. They assert that they occupy the place of the apostles, and that, on account of the above-mentioned things, they of the Roman Church, namely the prelates, clerks, and monks, and especially the inquisitors of heresy persecute them and call them heretics, although they are good men and good Christians, and that they are persecuted just as Christ and his apostles were by the Pharisees.*

Original Link: https://www.learnreligions.com/cathars-and-albigenses-249504